

HISTORY AND EAST-WEST DILEMMA IN THE NOVELS OF ORHAN PAMUK

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ABSTRACT

One of the most prolific and widely discussed writers of the century and winner of the Nobel Prize in literature for 2006, Ferit Orhan Pamuk has established himself as the most prominent and distinguished literary figures of Turkey since the 1970s. Apart from being avant-garde, he is also the most widely translated author in Turkey right from the early 2000s. As the first work which made Pamuk's writing accessible to English-language readers, *The White Castle* evoked considerable interest and was reviewed in prestigious literary magazines. In *The New York Times Book Review*, Jay Parini wrote, "a new star has risen in the east." (Parini, Npag). This newness is because of the absence of identity- diving literatures keeping Islamic traditions and chronicles of Turkey dormant.

KEYWORDS: White Castle, A New Star has Risen in the East & The New York Times Book Review

INTRODUCTION

Juxtaposing in his works, history with post- modernity and magic realism with socio- cultural realism and multi- narrative voices, as all- in- one power dose capsules, Pamuk creates a vast and kaleidoscopic aesthetic experience that overwhelms his readers. Paul Berman in *The New Republic* called Orhan Pamuk "extravagantly talented". Pamuk's debut in English was thus more ostentatious than that in Turkish. Though he started writing as early as in 1974, his first work appeared in English only in 1990. And with the other works which came out in the decade, Pamuk evoked an unprecedented critical response in the Turkish literary system, as well as outside Turkey, sparking many literary debates and polemics.

Orhan Pamuk was born in Istanbul in 1952 into a prosperous family of engineers. He and his family lived in the Westernized district of Nişantaşı, which figures in many of his novels. He finished Robert College and then enrolled in the Architecture Department at Istanbul Technical University. But after three years Pamuk discontinued his studies in order to build apartment houses because to Pamuk the latter implied a kind of lifestyle and architectural approach which destroyed the old texture and historical image of Istanbul (Turkish Daily News dtd. 10-12-2006). He entered the Institute of Journalism at Istanbul University not to be a journalist but just to delay his military service and obtain a university degree

In contrast to most Turkish literary figures, Pamuk continued to write fulltime, dedicating his career to literature. In his foreword to *Other Colors: Selected Essays and a Story* (2007) Pamuk points out that he writes about ten hours a day at a table in his room. Writing on a ten-hour-a-day schedule, he finished his first novel, *Darkness and Light* (in Turkish: *Cavdet Bey and His Sons*) in 1978. It was the co-winner of the Milliyet Publishing Novel Award for 1979.

When Pamuk started his career in the 70s, the most popular kind of novels where 'village novels', that is, novels reflecting the economic and social problems of the peasants and focusing on social conditions rather than individuals, considering the individual as a 'tool' for depicting these conditions. Novelists of that time generally used realism as their

main literary tool. Pamuk was the first writer in Turkey to make an aesthetic deviation from this kind of writing. He made the art of novel more artistic by incorporating the framework of history and tool of post modernism.

The most striking feature of Pamuk's works is perhaps the twin aspects of historicity and the dichotomy of the East- West dilemma. It seems that OrhanPamuk's use of "Turkish" modernist/ postmodernist techniques prove helpful in the integration of his writing style into other literary systems as well. However, this unique and seemingly difficult preference was to meet with strong reaction within the Turkish literary system. Each of Pamuk's works represents a non-stable image/identity keeping Ottoman or Turkish history as the underpinning. The dominant recurring theme is always history- be it modernism in *Silent House* (1983) or a post- modern allegory in *The White Castle*(1985)or the historiography and post- modernism in *My Name Is Red*. All the characters - usually also shown as a symbols- are oriental and national at the same time. The characters question their identity that is generally historically imposed and this is how the narrative proceeds.

"Not only does OrhanPamuk question the meta- narrative of Turkist secular nationalism (Turkism) in its various manifestations, he is thoroughly engaged in the work of interrogating the possibility of national transformations. This is most evident in his representation of Ottoman history, which broadly contains any number of secular national "taboos," including multiethnicity, multilingualism, cosmopolitanism, religion, and homosexuality, among others. Still, Pamuk is not interested in history with a capital H; he is in the writerly pursuit, rather, of new imaginative spaces. His technique of compounding points of view in narrative (the very medium through which identity is reified) to destabilize fixed identities has been a characteristic of his work"(Goknar, Npag)

OrhanPamuk's works are known to be post- modern- and at the same time evoking resonances of the vibrant and aesthetically colourful historic period of Ottoman Empire. (1301-1922). The Ottoman historical novel started with the rise of magic realism and non- realist kinds of writings around 1980s. The importance of Ottoman theme to Pamuk is seen through the method of intertwining the 17th century ottoman turkey/ Istanbul with the post- modern existential and political issues.

Pamuk's first novel, *Darkness and Light*, which was later published in the name Mr. Cevdet and His Sons and won the Orhan Kemal Prize in 1983. It tells the story of a small shop owner and his sons and covers three generations from the beginning of the century, and on a parallel and subtle level,it's also the story of Turkish Republic's private life.

Pamuk's second novel *The Silent House* was published in 1983that was different from the first in technique and structure, *The Silent House*also became a success. With this historical novel Pamuk stepped into a more technically complex and elusive world of postmodernism. Interestingly,Pamuk here borrows the post- modern literary devices that is associated with the Western experimental writers, but at the same time does not use them as anything more than an attempt to make an exotic twist to depict the Muslim culture of his place.

Post- modern fiction, as we know, generally takes its subject as the medium of fiction and re- creates reality out of that subject of fiction. In a more literary sense, post modern fiction generally moves away from specificities like time and space or particular frames. Pamuk, on the other hand, uses it to create a sort of meaning which is tangentially involved with history and thus represent Turkey as what it was and what it is now in the entire oeuvre of his writings. Understandably, conventional realism would fail to depict what Pamuk wanted to show, and in his writings he naturally resorted to more complex narrative domains of post- modernism and magic realism.

The Black Book is a deliberately complex postmodern novel open to many interpretations; its complexity has deterred even the most adamant readers, some of whom have criticized the long and complex sentences, finding them ungrammatical. There were also critics who praised Pamuk as an author who has proved his ability to innovate on Turkish syntax. These polemics over *The Black Book* brought Pamuk so far into the limelight that whatever he did and wrote evoked the interest of the media. The English translation of *The Black Book* made Pamuk an international figure as he gave a mysterious look to the city Istanbul in this novel.

The post- modern twist obvious in the novel is the 'text- within- the - text' structure and the inclusion of newspapers columns as a tool to develop narrative and the back- and- forth movement. This temporal disruptions then use other magical/ surreal or fictional symbols and devices arousing an engrossing mood

"Although the metafictional devices in The Black Book—which mostly reinforce the theme of doubleness, of the merging of identity—are belabored at greater length and do induce a state of prolonged tedium in their humorlessness, they aren't much more interesting in The White Castle, which focuses on doubling and identity shifts even more intensely. In neither book would I necessarily call these devices "hijinks," since they are not flaunted in a spirit of exuberance or creative mischief but seem labored and perfunctory; in both of them the metafictional elements serve little purpose aside from heightening the sense of portentousness to a level that can't finally be sustained" (Green, Npag).

The English translation of his next novel, *My Name is Red* that came out in 2001 and sold 160,000 copies, is the most post- modern writings of Pamuk. No sooner had it appeared than it was on the agenda of the critics and reviewers. In 2003 it was nominated by three libraries-the Universitäts-und Landsbibliothek Bonn, Hartford Public Library (USA), and Bibliothèques Municipales Geneva Switzerland for the world's most lucrative literary prize: the International IMPAC Literary Award

The novel was critically acclaimed, catapulting Pamuk to a commendable stature-

"With its cast of multiple narrators (including the color red and various dead people) and its thematic focus on art and the nature of artistic creation, it is also the most lively of Pamuk's books, its kaleidoscopic narration, relatively short chapters, and mystery plot (who killed the master illuminator Elegant Effendi?) at its center keeping the novel moving at an engaging pace" (Green, Npag).

His novel *The New Life*, about young university students influenced by a mysterious book, was published in Turkey in 1994 and became one of the most widely read books in Turkish literature. *Snow*, which he describes as 'my first and last political novel,' was published in 2002. In this book set in the small city of Kars in northeastern Turkey he experimented with a new type of 'political novel,' telling the story of violence and tension between political Islamists, soldiers, secularists, and Kurdish and Turkish nationalists. In 1999 a selection of his articles on literature and culture written for newspapers and magazines in Turkey and abroad, together with a selection of writings from his private notebooks, was published under the title *Other Colours*.

Istanbul, is a poetical work that is hard to classify, combining the author's early memoirs up to the age of 22, and an essay about the city of Istanbul, illustrated with photographs from his own album, and pictures by western painters and Turkish photographers

Being from architectural and painting background, it was easier for Pamuk to lend his characters those touches that were tough for a non-artist. This makes his reading interesting despite a rush of historical details in it. This did lead to a conflict between Turkish (Islamic) aesthetics and Western aesthetics. Pamuk's ways of analyzing and representing the world is obviously different.

In the context of perspective, (this idea is treated elaborately in *My Name is Red*, during a discussion between characters about perspective in painting) Pamuk says,

"One is that of seeing the world through the eyes of any individual person—looking at things from our humble point of view. The other is seeing the world through God's eyes, from high above as the Islamic painters did, and perceiving the totality of, say a battle from above. The latter is more like seeing with the mind's eye, rather than the eye itself" (Altinel, Npag)

The dominant presence and profundity of history in Pamuk's works address this issue of establishing an Islamic (Turkish) identity specific to his narrative. All his novels take the creative impetus either from an acute sense of the history of Turkey or from an overwhelming cultural polemic between the East and the West. When it comes to the second aspect, his works become intensely political too. Issues like freedom of expression, national and universal terrorism and human rights become the fundamental paradigms of discourse in his political novels.

The silent house (1983) for example is set in a small town near Istanbul, called Cennethisar. Set in 1980, the silent house carries an environment of great tension. Through the character Faruk (who is a historian in the novel) the readers get a glimpse of the history of Ottoman chronicle.

In *The Black Book*, the newspaper columns (written by one of the characters who work for a newspaper) are the way the socio-political events are unveiled. The start of political issues, coming of the saviour, the assignation invitation etc, are all recorded with the help of the column-method Pamuk uses in the novel. The columns are, in a sense, documented history.

In novels like *My Name is Red*, and *The White Castle*, history works as a major textscape which frames the entire narrative. It also places the narrative in a creative context where the literary frame is entirely transported into the realms of a post modern juxtaposition of the real world and the world of fiction. In such works, the vast historical knowledge of the writer is what amazes the readers.

Istanbul, Memories of a City (2005), perhaps the most gloomy and melancholic of Pamuk's works, is a deep analysis of the history of the city, of its old buildings, streets, pavements, paintings and people. The profound pictorial representations bring solid history with abstract brush strokes. Even the museum shown in the novel is a melancholic history of the mind of the character.

CONCLUSIONS

The essential Turkishness that is contingent on various unreconciled contexts like secular nationalism, European orientalism, Islamic Mysticism, etc are ultimately represented through historical narratives, like the presentation of the multifaceted cultural history of Istanbul over Anatolian nationalism. But the novelist never ties the plot entirely in history alone, for example, in novels like *The White Castle*, it is evidently seen as both historical and modern at the same time. Pamuk sees the present of Turkish life through its past, may be a kind of juxtaposition of the Eastern blood with a Western

body, thereby transforming both form and content

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